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# PROTEST, ACTIVISM, AND FALSE INFORMATION

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False information about and within social movements has a long history, from early conceptions of collective behavior as susceptible to irrational beliefs (Garner 1997) to government suppression of social movements through the spreading of false information (Cunningham 2004) to unintentional but nonetheless inaccurate reporting about social movements (Gitlin 1980). In recent years, though, the quality, quantity, range of producers and spreaders, and reach of false information has greatly expanded, aided by the pervasiveness of digital and social media (Anderson 2019), making the relationship between false information and social movements a pressing academic and practical concern.

In this chapter, we focus on disinformation, which we define as false information created and spread with knowledge of its inaccuracies, and misinformation, false information spread without knowledge of its inaccuracies (see Spies 2019 on definitional debates). Both are false information, which we use when finer distinctions are not useful. We also discuss propaganda, which involves government and/or corporate uses of true, false, and misleading information for political goals (Benkler et al. 2018).

Our fundamental argument is that false information and propaganda play different theoretical roles in social movements based on the producer and/or diffuser. We briefly review the history of scholarship on false information in social movements and then build on these insights to specify five different theoretical lenses – each connected to specific producers – for understanding false information in social movements.

## False information in the history of social movement studies

Collective behavior research from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the scholastic progenitor to social movements research, offers the earliest view of false information, viewing crowds (including protests) as irrational and susceptible to rumour (Garner 1997). As populist-turned-authoritarian movements swept across Europe in the 1930s to the 1950s, students of collective behavior shifted towards analysing political movements, arguing that individual traits made some susceptible to the demagoguery and propaganda of authoritarian rulers (Adorno et al. 1950). In both views, false information drove collective action.

In the 1960s, contemporary social movement scholarship challenged negative understandings of protest and distinguished it from collective behavior (Garner 1997). Attention shifted

towards governments' usage of false information to suppress social movements (e.g. government agents misrepresenting social movements to the press and spreading false information through informants to generate internal conflict; see Marx 1974; Cunningham 2004), casting false information as a protest inhibitor.

The rise of populist and/or alt-right movements in the US and in Europe has swung the pendulum back to the catalysing view (Bennet and Livingston 2018). Both views are important, and we add three more theoretical relationships, discussing all five in the next section.

## Five theoretical lenses for false information and social movements

Despite the ominous moniker of disinformation, it has multiple theoretical roles in social movements. We identify five relationships between false information and social movements: (1) false information as movement catalyst, (2) disinformation and propaganda as repressive tools, (3) false information as a weaponisation of free speech, (4) false information as a commodity, and (5) misinformation resulting from journalistic norms applied to protest. Each of these approaches varies in the amount of existing scholarship and is organised around different producers of false information.

### *False information as a movement catalyst*

Resource mobilisation theory claims that social movements emerge when grievances are connected with resources, but grievances still must be perceived and interpreted (Earl 2009), allowing false information to serve as a catalyst. As a result, misinformation has contributed to the rise of movements internationally, including the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia, in which false rumours served as a catalyst for protest (Hassanpour 2014), and the worldwide anti-vaccination movement. For modern vaccination objectors, who are carrying forward safety concerns that began in the mid-1800s (Ołpiński 2012), two pieces of misinformation are particularly impactful: a 1982 documentary claiming the diphtheria, pertussis, and tetanus vaccine caused brain damage, seizures, and developmental delays (Ołpiński 2012) and a 1995 journal article linking autism to the measles, mumps, and rubella vaccine (Kata 2010). Both claims were the result of poor science, but this misinformation contributed to enduring vaccine scepticism.

Disinformation can also catalyse movements. In 2014, a false claim about a CDC whistleblower reinforced fears over a vaccine-autism link and was emphasised, along with other high-profile disinformation, in recent anti-vaccination converts' online discourse (Mitra et al. 2016). White supremacists spread false information covertly to grow their movement; 'cloaked websites' (i.e. websites that obscure their political agenda) spread racist viewpoints while deliberately misleading their audiences about the source and validity of their claims (Keener 2018).

Based on the anti-vaccination movement, some have suggested that disinformation spreads easily to those with a predisposition for conspiracy thinking (e.g. Mitra et al. 2016). But false information may spread easily simply because it resonates with pre-existing views: people are more willing to believe content that confirms their existing beliefs and disbelieve and/or see as biased information that contradicts pre-existing views (Earl and Garrett 2017). For instance, false information from right-wing sources like Breitbart, which is heavily implicated in the rise of the alt-right (Bennet and Livingston 2018), is believable due to readers' pre-existing right-wing leanings.

Some argue the alignment of pre-existing beliefs with false information especially benefits all populist movements, not just the alt-right, but many populist movements do not depend on false information. Populist movements vary broadly across time, and some emerge precisely

because they surface accurate information obscured by elites (e.g. progressives who benefited from muckraking). Moreover, as Bennet and Livingston (2018) argue, the alt-right claims a populist mantel but is actually racist and xenophobic. However, it is very likely that pre-existing views make false information more believable in movements attacking expertise (e.g. climate denial and anti-vaccination movements).

No matter the movement, belief in false information may spiral. For instance, Lewis and Marwick (2017) postulate a vicious cycle in which acceptance of one alt-right talking point begets acceptance of another, with people becoming increasingly vulnerable to false information as acceptance increases, and trust in mainstream media is undermined. Thus, anti-vaccination or alt-right engagement may be the result of a vicious cycle of increasing false information, aided by biased consumption, rather than a broad acceptance of conspiracy theories.

The evolution of believing the increasingly unbelievable is important because it helps explain the rise of radical and potentially dangerous extremes in movements that thrive on false information. The rise of alt-right terrorism is a prime example, with many citing 'Pizzagate', an alt-right conspiracy theory that spread widely on social media and fake news websites including Infowars (e.g. Keener 2018), as a critical example. 'Pizzagate' proponents claimed Democratic Party members were involved in a pedophile sex-trafficking ring run from a pizza parlor. Based on these claims, an armed man entered the restaurant, attempting to rescue the (nonexistent) victims. Keener (2018) summarises this self-reinforcing cycle: 'Propelled by far-right populist rhetoric and the legitimation of alternative forms of "news", it became thinkable that this conspiracy. . . *could* be possible' (147).

This escalation may be further aided by fractures in movements in which moderates who are unprepared to believe increasingly unbelievable false information are separated from extremists who are. Zwerman et al. (2000) showed that when moderate and more extreme activists become socially and/or organisationally separated from one another, moderates cannot restrain a spiral towards extreme beliefs. Left in an echo chamber with only other extremists, extremists push further away from the mainstream and towards violence, even when false information is not involved.

In sum, false information can catalyse movement emergence and feed spirals towards extremism. But accurate information may drive initial support for other movements. The truth of both statements suggests that scholars need to understand the conditions under which accurate information, contested information (i.e. accurate information that may lead to many alternative conclusions), and false information prove consequential to the rise of movements and whether false information is unique in its ability to drive self-perpetuating shifts towards the extreme.

## *False information as a strategy of social movement repression*

We identify three types of actors who may use false information to oppose or repress social movements (see Earl 2011 for a review on repression).

### *State-based domestic repression*

When domestic authorities engage movements, larger propaganda repertoires – which mix accurate information, misrepresented information, and disinformation – are called upon. The most successful realisation of social movement repression is quiescence. Decades ago, propaganda and censorship achieved some modicum of quiescence in the USSR, China, and other authoritarian states. While Russia and China used propaganda and censorship somewhat differently (Zhao 2012), they both used state-controlled media to bolster their regimes and censorship

to limit unfavourable information. For instance, Munger describes the Chinese approach to Tiananmen:

> Early in the occupation of the Square by student protesters, the Chinese regime used the media to promote the narrative that these students were agents of the United States, aiming to undermine China. The students were unable to broadcast their true goal and grievances, and the regime's narrative was unchallenged throughout much of China. Once the regime found it necessary to begin shooting, they switched their media strategy, banning all mention of the protest and its repression.
>
> (Munger et al. 2019, 820)

More generally, Hassanpour (2014) argues that state control over news media may prevent mass dissatisfaction from becoming widespread in times of political unrest. What amounts to state-run media may also exist in nations with democratic elections but authoritarian leanings (e.g. Turkey, Ecuador) and serve a similar function (Walker and Orttung 2014).

Widespread internet usage has complicated this approach. Deibert et al. (2010) posit a 'three generation' framework for online propaganda, which interestingly translates historical offline tendencies. First, governments may limit access to the internet entirely (e.g. North Korea) or only in moments of turmoil (e.g. Egypt during the Arab Spring) (Howard et al. 2011). But wholesale restrictions are difficult to maintain economically; targeted censorship represents a second-generation approach, as has occurred in Russia, with government-requested removals of anti-Putin social media posts (Sanovich et al. 2018). Chinese authorities allow criticisms of the state but heavily censor social media support for activism (King et al. 2013). Both first- and second-generation restrictions occur while traditional state-based or 'statist commercialized' media (Vartanova 2011) circulate pro-regime messages.

Third-generation strategies, which Deibert et al. (2010) refer to as 'active engagement', go on the information offensive (Gunitsky 2015). Unable to censor social movements entirely, governments hope to advance views favourable to the regime, promote seemingly grassroots opposition to social movements and distract from opponents' messages by offering alternatives. King et al. (2017) estimate the Chinese government uses the so-called '50ct army' to create 448 million social media comments per year that largely 'involve cheerleading for China, the revolutionary history of the Communist Party, or other symbols of the regime' (484). These posts do not engage with government sceptics or discuss controversial issues. Rather, 'the goal of this massive secretive operation is . . . to distract the public and change the subject' (King et al. 2017, 484). As with any state propaganda, these efforts may spread disinformation or contested information that is reported as uncontested.

This response can be found in many nations. Munger et al.'s study of the La Salida/anti-Maduro movement showed that governments may 'advance many competing narratives that [address] issues unrelated to the opposition's criticism' (2019, 815) in the hopes of flooding social media platforms and diverting attention from information they cannot suppress. In Mexico, so-called 'Peñabots' promote fake trends in order to distract and drown out government criticism (Porup 2015). Elections and social movements may cross over, as occurred when Peñabots tried to distract from the emergence of the #YoSoy132 movement around the 2012 Mexican elections (Treré 2016).

Governments may also drown out messages they oppose by flooding digital spaces with spam. In Mexico, Suárez-Serrato et al. (2016) reported on an influx of spam tweets in response to the #YaMeCanse hashtag protesting government complacency in the disappearance of more than 40 student activists.

Authorities may also directly attack or discredit opponents by 'mobilizing regime supports to disrupt planned rallies, plant false information, monitor opposition websites, and harass opposition members' (Gunitsky 2015, 45), drawing on age-old government false information tactics used even in nations with democratically elected governments (Cunningham 2004). During the 2009 Iranian protests, for instance, some Twitter accounts were suspected to be government-run in order to mislead the public about protest activities (Cohen 2009). YouTube and Twitter spread protest news, some of which came from inside Iran's governmental regime, in hopes of paving the way for arresting opposition leaders (Esfandiari 2010). Likewise, following the Gezi protests, the Turkish government hired social media experts to boost pro-Erdoğan accounts and spread disinformation (Medieros 2014).

Regime campaigns can be quite sophisticated. Keller et al. (2017) show a division of tasks amongst different state actors promoting propaganda, including groups that used their bots to amplify favoured news or social media posts (generated from within and from real external users) while others attacked opponents. State-orchestrated propaganda can also be designed to appear as if it is civic in origin (Keller et al. 2017). As with the astroturf movements discussed later in this chapter, even when information is not false, an element of deceit may come from making social media activity appear as if it is grassroots when it is not.

The effectiveness of these campaigns, though, is unclear (Gunitsky 2015). Fominaya (2011), studying protests in Spain that erupted when the Spanish government was thought to have spread disinformation about the 11-M terrorist bombings in Madrid, shows that disinformation can backfire. Moreover, movements can co-opt these tactics, as leaders of the Egyptian Uprising of 2011 did by posting disinformation about protests to evade Egyptian police (Kirkpatrick 2011).

### *Corporate repression*

Although far less researched, private actors play important roles in repression (Earl 2004). So, too, is the case with false information within the repressive repertoire. Corporations have also used false information to create quiescence, attack critics, and misdirect attention. For instance, despite consensus on anthropogenic climate change among scientists, the fossil fuel industry has funded disinformation campaigns to limit the effectiveness of climate advocacy, increase public doubt about climate change, downplay the benefits of sustainable technologies, and overstate the risks of 'green' energy sources (e.g. Livesey 2002). Chemical companies attempt to reduce activism by challenging independent studies and producing and distributing misleading scientific information (e.g. Olsson 2011). The food and beverage industry has run misinformation campaigns to downplay the risks of high sugar consumption, targeting Black families, Hispanic youth, and people who are poor, and run false information campaigns about 'healthy' foods that contain deceptively high amounts of sugar to limit activism demanding change (e.g. Bailin et al. 2014).

Astroturf countermovements are designed to make it appear as though there is organic, civic opposition to movements when there may be none. The misrepresentation of the source is misleading, and these campaigns often also include false and/or misrepresented substantive information. As Walker (2014) notes, astroturf campaigns camouflage corporate interests as grassroots activism. Smokers' rights, for instance, was more boardroom strategy than grassroots concern (Derry and Waikar 2008), yet it has been key to limiting anti-smoking activism, undermining tobacco control policies, and deflecting responsibility for health effects (Wander and Malone 2006).

### *Countermovements*

Countermovements can use disinformation to attack opponents. For instance, a prominent white supremacist spread disinformation about Black Lives Matter (BLM) in hopes that the government would classify BLM as a terrorist organisation (Lewis and Marwick 2017). False information can make movements defend the accuracy of their own claims and materials because of doubt sowed by countermovements and governments (Tufekci 2017). For instance, Project Veritas, an alt-right group, has a track record of attacking movements through misleading editing of videos and through fabricated 'sting' operations (Benkler et al. 2018). The Center for Medical Progress's leader lost a $2 million lawsuit as the result of misleading videos aimed at reducing abortion access (Tavernise 2019), but not before the videos led to legislative action and rallied opponents of abortion access.

Larger complexes of opposition groups, including corporations, countermovements, and others, may collaborate in the supply and distribution of false information. For instance, where climate denial is concerned, Brown (2017) argues that the 'climate disinformation campaign can be understood as a movement of corporations, organizations, and individuals that have systematically attacked mainstream climate change science using tactics that are radically inconsistent with responsible scientific skepticism' (128). These actors operate independently of one another but are able to connect through the internet to develop a 'denial machine' (Brown 2017, 129) or through think tanks, which 'were key organizational components. . . [that] developed and promulgated scientific misinformation via a wide range of distribution channels, including mass media appearances, Web sites, publication of books, and providing testimony in congressional hearings' (Brulle 2019, 2).

Polarised (mis)perceptions create difficulty in studying movement-countermovement false information though. In abortion politics, rhetoric is so contested that the labelling of opponents is disputed. Groups that claim the label 'pro-life' refer to opponents as 'pro-abortion'. But their opponents disagree with that label, using terms like 'reproductive rights' or 'abortion rights' instead. Abortion rights activists disagree that their opponents are pro-life, preferring the term 'anti-choice'.

Divergent frames and rhetoric may lead actors to see misinformation as among opponents' tactics, but disinformation exists too. For example, Bryant et al. (2014) examined the websites of crisis pregnancy centres in states with abortion access waiting periods, finding that about 80 percent of websites included at least one piece of false information about abortions. Such false information serves to further rally support for countermovements and threatens to reduce resources and support for their opponents.

## *False information as a weaponisation of free speech*

Nations often believe that domestic social movements are the result of foreign intervention. J. Edgar Hoover dedicated the FBI to the repression of communism and other movements, which Hoover saw as duped by communists into agitation (Cunningham 2004). Likewise, many regimes internationally see the US as responsible for instigating movements in their countries. Though the veracity of these claims historically varies, disinformation is a key ingredient. Furthermore, there is significant evidence that countries are intervening in the politics and social movements of other nations, with Russia as a leading perpetrator.

In the case of Russian intervention in the US, Russia appears to be trying to weaponise free speech by using it as the opening to sow disinformation, which increases political polarisation, reduces trust in institutions, and causes democratic turmoil. In this way, the freedoms that allow

social movements to emerge and develop in democratic nations are weaponised to poison the political soil out of which these movements grow. Directly repressing or diminishing specific social movements is not the goal of these interventions, but rather the diminishment of democratic politics more generally. Indeed, Russian accounts have been linked to orchestration of both left- and right-wing protests (Benkler et al. 2018).

Efforts have included the coordination of campaign events alongside 'methods clearly intended to instigate street clashes' (Benkler et al. 2018, 241). So-called troll farms, often attributed to foreign powers, engage with activist hashtags to increase political polarisation (Nimmo et al. 2018), as they did with #BlackLivesMatter and #BlueLivesMatter.

Where Russian interference is concerned, there is no neat separation between interventions into elections and social movements. According to platform-provided data from Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook, Russia leveraged social media to spread propaganda in the US, using a specific list of social issues to engage Americans. Posts documented protests and pushed people to attend or incite protests. In addition to BLM and various separatist movements, Russian operatives also targeted movements around gun rights, patriotism, police brutality, and LGBT issues to drive polarisation (Diresta et al. 2018).

For social movements, this weaponisation of free speech may have significant consequences. Tufekci (2017) claims disinformation campaigns so overwhelm people that they become disillusioned and give up trying to actually figure out the truth. We argue polarisation itself is also significant because of the kinds of vicious information cycles discussed earlier. Polarisation also increases group identity (Yardi and Boyd 2010) and motivates partisans while demobilising moderates (Wojcieszak 2011) so that people with more moderate views may become less likely to participate in social movements (Earl and Garrett 2017).

These collateral effects of disinformation and the assault on democracies that the weaponisation of free speech represents may be more important than the specific disinformation. Benkler et al. (2018), for instance, shows Russian accounts only successfully organised a few small protests, and social movements with substantial web presences can 'correct and challenge misinformation shared online and offline' (Anderson 2019, 203). But how quickly and how far those corrections can spread is uncertain (Starbird et al. 2014) and may vary by country (Applebaum et al. 2017).

## *False information as a commodity*

For-profit actors create and/or distribute false information related to social movements to make money regardless of the impact false information has on activism. Three key actors profit from the spread of false information: disinformation producers, ad placement companies, and social media platforms.

Citizens of Eastern European countries such as Georgia and Macedonia have been identified as particularly prolific producers of false information due to high unemployment and few sanctions (Kshetri and Voas 2017), although organisations may also be involved (Figueira and Oliveira 2017). It is tempting to link for-profit actors to larger political motivations, but ideology likely only reflects profit: content aimed at right-wing audiences appears particularly lucrative (Kshetri and Voas 2017) while similar content aimed at leftist voters is not (Vojak 2018).

Ad placement companies enable the spread of for-profit false information by providing revenue to disinformation websites. These companies profit from linking businesses to disinformation websites and have little incentive to blacklist disinformation sites (Braun and Eklund 2019).

Social media platforms benefit from false information through the artificially inflated user growth created by fake accounts associated with false information (Dayen 2017). Companies

such as Facebook and Twitter have economic models that rely heavily on user growth, creating little incentive to remove fake accounts and making them slow to do so (Dayen 2017; Matyus 2019).

Profit-motivated production of and brokering in false information means that when protest is an important topic of public discussion, injecting false information about protest will become even more profitable. For instance, in Hong Kong, for-profit false information producers discredited Hong Kong protestors as unrest grew (Matyus 2019). This implies that a consequence of growing public interest in a movement may be the growth of for-profit disinformation circulating about it. As with the weaponisation of free speech, false information about movements has negative consequences for targeted movements and democratic life.

### *Misinformation and journalistic norms in the coverage of protest*

One critical difference between institutional political elites and social movement actors involves standing (Amenta et al. 2017), which refers to assumed newsworthiness or expertise. Social movements have to work to achieve standing and compete for scant coverage while institutional political elites face far fewer barriers in gaining coverage because of their assumed standing (Gamson 1998). The relative lack of standing for social movement actors means that when false information is shared about them, they face significant hurdles in correcting it. For instance, BLM has not been able to fully confront claims in reporting that were promoted by Russian trolls.

Journalists play a major role in publicly defining movements even though journalists may be selecting for extremity (Gitlin 1980), perceived authenticity (Sobieraj 2010), or other characteristics in deciding which movement issues and actors to cover and how (Gottlieb 2015). Scholars generally do not believe that professional journalists make conscious, calculated efforts to frame stories in derogatory, false, or misleading ways; however, informational biases can still lead to coverage that supports misperceptions (Boykoff 2006) and may be perceived as misinformation. Similarly, professional journalistic practices may hamper the efforts of countermovements to spread disinformation through the news (Benkler et al. 2018), implying that journalist practices may make misinformation more likely but disinformation less likely.

## Conclusion

The research reviewed demonstrates the varied roles of false information (and its producers) in social movements. Public acceptance of misinformation and the intentional spread of disinformation may serve as movement catalysts. Disinformation may also serve as a tool for movement opponents, including state-based and corporate repression using false information to create quiescence, attack critics, and misdirect attention away from negative information, and for countermovements focused on discrediting their opponents.

Social movements are caught in the crossfire as foreign actors weaponise free speech, spreading movement-related disinformation to increase political polarisation, and for-profit actors profit from clicks on movement-related disinformation. In both cases, while social movements are the not the direct targets of false information, there are significant collateral consequences for social movements and democratic systems. Journalistic norms around standing may also unintentionally contribute to the misrepresentation of social movements, although these norms likely guard against disinformation about social movements.

The current technological and political contexts exacerbate the potential for false information to impact movements as social media facilitates rapid dissemination, and political

polarisation makes combatting false information exponentially more difficult. Research examining the spread and effects of false information related to social movements is very important, with many areas needing more development (e.g. the use of false information by countermovements). It is important that scholarship consider how accepted-but-false beliefs have informed conventional and protest politics in the past as well. For instance, racist, xenophobic, and sexist social policies are often built around and justified by false information about group differences, rendering the relationship between politics and false information even older than many acknowledge.

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